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Watermelon Hill: Giving Birth In Secret



[Don Shelby](#)
Reporting

(WCCO) *St. Paul* Hundreds of girls were forced to give away their babies during a time when society did not accept unwed mothers. Some of the girls were sent to a place in St. Paul nicknamed "Watermelon Hill".

Linda Back McKay is a poet, writer and a mother who had little choice but to put her baby up for adoption.

She was 19 years old, in the midst of the sexual revolution, the 60s. When she told her parents she was pregnant, her father called her a name she said she will never forget: whore. He told her she was unfit to keep her baby.

"It was worse than murdering your grandmother," Back McKay said. "It was ruining your family is what you did if you got yourself pregnant."

The Catholic Infant Home used to stand on Carroll Avenue in St. Paul. It is where unwed mothers, like Back McKay, went to give birth, only to give up their babies.

The boys in the neighborhood gave the place its nickname. They would catcall to the big-bellied girls who looked like they were hiding a watermelon under their dress, so they became known as the girls of Watermelon Hill.

Details of the building are sketchy, as only a few photos exist and a few bricks remain. It seems like the place and the past were erased, out of shame.

"It was a horrible shame on yourself and your entire family," Back McKay said.

For the girls living there, much of the day was filled with chores.

"We had to scrub the stairways on our hands and knees with bleach and these were pregnant girls," Back McKay said.

Scared and alone, Back McKay gave birth to a boy she named Jeffrey. She was one of the lucky ones, as most babies were taken from the mother immediately.

"And I went into the nursery and held him and took off his clothes and blankets and wanted to make sure he was perfect and I kissed him goodbye," Back McKay recalled. "I always wanted to find him. It was like a big, dark hole that I carried around in my life."

Sister Jane McDonald was a novice stationed at the Catholic Infant Home in the late 60s. She was an activist back then and remains one now, caring about the community.

She said when she looks back at her time at the Catholic Infant Home, she is ashamed by how the young mothers were treated by society and by some members of the Catholic Church.

"They carried the stigma of shame," McDonald said, adding that some of the mothers' emotions are still frayed today.

McDonald read a letter she still keeps, from one of the girls.

"I haven't talked about my baby since I got back," McDonald read. "Nobody wants to hear about it. I really want my baby even more after I found out he was born blind."

Peg Riley was happy to see McDonald recently. Riley said McDonald was one of the few who gave her comfort when she was a teen at Watermelon Hill in 1968.

Riley remembers going to a jewelry store to buy a cheap wedding ring, so outsiders would think she was married.

Like all the other women, she was given a new name during her stay, which they said was for her protection.

"I was pretty shell-shocked," Riley said. "There was no discussion about if it was a good idea, because the expectation was, of course, you would do this."

The women questioned themselves, decisions they made, but never their love for their babies.

"I don't think anyone can understand what that's like, unless you are a birth mother," Back McKay said. "It's just something you don't get unless you lived it."

Both Back McKay and Riley were reunited with their children, but many of the mothers and families said they wanted their reunions to remain private.

Some of the reunions were happy, others were not. There are still some mothers who will never find out where their children ended up or who they have become.

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